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ABSTRACT

Children can acquire written language skills and abilities through the natural process by which they acquire oral language. If as infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, children are exposed to rich print environments, they transfer assumptions from experiences with oral dialogue to the more focused situations of print. Discrepancies in the ease with which children learn to speak and learn to read largely result from the disruption of natural process by educational programs, as indicated by the fact that as many as 25% of entering first graders in the United States have learned to read without formal instruction. The emerging discipline of psycholinguistics emphasizes that language and reading are constructive processes. Children need to be told that they already know a great deal about how these processes work. Miscue analysis, schema theory, and the language experience approach involves procedures that build on the child's experiences and are based on developmental language learning processes. The axioms these approaches provide teachers are "Begin where the student is" and "Teach to the child's strengths." With a process orientation to writing, teachers can affect the ways children think and can maintain the meaningfulness and joy which motivated children's oral language development. (Author/RH)

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Practicality and Literacy

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Practicality and Literacy

We are born into this world with the instinct to survive. Motivated by practicality, the newest infant separates noise from speech. But rather than modeling after the sounds of a vacuum cleaner or a garbage disposal, the infant notes that his crying gets him the dry diaper, something to ease his stomach, and company at three in the morning. Even a minimal fulfillment of these basic needs, reinforced daily by eye contact or gaze-coupling with the caregivers, helps the infant realize that he is not alone in the world, that some kind of bridging goes on from one human being to another (Bruner, 1978). And when most of the sensory-touching events in his daily life are accompanied by caregiver questions, explanations, rhymes, jokes and songs, the infant's means to become a member of the world of communicators is assured.

The speech act is self-reinforcing. When the infant communicates, he wants to communicate more. He learns to differentiate his cries and to wait for responses. He grunts, gurgles and coos, using smiling and pointing, like his caregiver, to supplement conversations. With babbling, he joyfully practices and creates a broad picture of how language sounds and begins to fill in the pieces. Most of us have had the experience with a baby whom we know is asking us a question, but we have no way to answer because we can not understand the elements of the question.

Once the infant has the broad picture for HOW TALK SOUNDS, he begins to label items, events, and people in his immediate environment. He categorizes his labels syntactically and semantically. Cups, saucers, bowls, the refrigerator, and large sink, are objects that belong in the kitchen. Shoes, socks, jeans, and shirts are items kept in his closet. He notices the parts

needed for the completion of an act. If his caregiver has shoes in hand, he hunts for socks. He also picks up on words and actions that cue. The appearance of his stroller usually means a trip outside. The toddler then joins syntactic categories, "Allgone milk", "Daddy bye-bye", "No up" within a meaningful context, and tests hypotheses and retains the strategies and solutions that work for him. In an effort to respond more quickly and accurately to people and events, he constantly integrates new information with old, employing his ever-expanding knowledge of the world and his linguistic model as his touchstones (Smith, 1975). He uses language to help him get a handle on his world.

Central to the concept of the speech act is dialogue. While the infant moves toward toddlerhood, what are adults around him doing? The successful caregiver operates under two related assumptions. The first belief is that the child can understand more than he can say. Caregivers talk to infants soon after they are born, consciously verbalizing that the infant probably does not understand them, but talking anyway because they like to, or perhaps because we are unconsciously programmed as a species to be language teachers as well as language learners. The second belief is that interaction with the child must aim at this understanding. For this reason, caregivers up the stakes and hold the child responsible for previous knowledge, e.g. questions with falling intonation inquire about information they believe the child already knows; questions with rising intonation mean new information is about to be supplied (Pines, 1979).

And because the caregiver aims at competence, he concentrates on the child's understanding of reality. If the child points to a sheep and says,

"That's a dog", the caregiver corrects him. Generally, the child tunes in to this kind of help because it improves his communicative competence. However, if the child states, "We goed downtown and buyed two mouses," the caregiver does not correct the form because the message is intact, and the child would not tune in to correction of this kind because he has communicated.

While the child is maturing, he is simultaneously socialized by the cultural group into which his language family falls. He learns not to use the same vocabulary, idioms, manner of speaking, posture, or gesture in church, in school, or at play. He edits or expands according to the age group with whom he is dealing. With peers, elders, relatives, authority figures, and younger children, he plays different roles. He learns when to speak and when not to, how to be tactful, and what is saracastic. And because he is a problem-solver rather than a rote learner, he is flexible, adapting what he says to various situations and matching experiences to what he already knows in order to comprehend.

If, as an infant, toddler, and preschooler, a child is exposed to a rich print environment, he transfers assumptions from his experiences with oral dialogue to the more focussed situations of the print.

In this instance Richard and his mother are 'reading' the pictures in a book. Before this kind of learning begins, certain things have already been established. Richard has learned about pointing as a pure indicating act, making usual or unexpected objects rather than things wanted immediately. He has also learned to understand that sounds refer in some singular way to objects or events. Richard and his mother, moreover, have long since established well-regulated turn-taking routines, which probably were developing as early as his third or fourth month. And finally, Richard has learned that books are to be looked at, not eaten or torn; that objects depicted are to be responded to in a particular way with sounds in a pattern or dialogue (Bruner, p.44).

And because Richard is in an English print environment, by 18 months he has learned how to turn a book rightside up and turn pages from left to right. Early reading is also an oral dialogue that teaches.

'What's that?' asks the mother, pointing to a page in a picture book. 'Bow-Wow', replies the 18-month-old boy. 'Good', says the mother, and she points to the picture on the following page. 'What's that?' she asks again, but in a different tone - with a rising inflection - for she knows that her child hasn't seen this animal before. And without waiting for his response, she answers for him: 'A zebra'. It sounds as if this mother is teaching her child vocabulary, and she is. But she is also doing something far more important and basic: She is teaching him the rules of dialogue in human society. Through such exchanges he learns to recognize the meaning of different intonations, to respond to questions, to take turns (Pines, 1979, p.35).

About print, the child learns that books tell a story, pictures support the story. In English, we look at books from left to right, top to bottom, and the print seems to trigger oral language he can recognize and even reproduce to some degree. He develops a schema for HOW BOOKS SOUND WHEN THEY ARE READ and proceeds to fill in details with continued experience with print. Toddlers will tell you the story of a book through its pictures, read a story to you while looking over the top of the book, and supply words you dare to skip as you read familiar stories. In fact, these events observed by so many parents emphasize that we need to revise our definition of reading to include notions of development and practicality. If three-year-olds exposed to print exhibit similar characteristics and consider themselves to be reading, then so should we (Baghban, 1979). For both the caregiver and the infant the story is the meaningful communicative event and the book is their focus. The infant initially may have only liked being held, but the joy in understanding the action while being entertained nurtures a place for reading in his life. Early conversation is motivated by need and becomes pleasurable through songs, rhymes, and jokes. Early

reading begins as a pleasurable activity which has the potential to become a necessity.

Early writing begins with a love of process. Seeing others write grocery lists, thank you notes, and telephone messages, and having materials at hand, a toddler will scribble. Fascinated by putting marks on paper (as well as walls, sneakers, arms, legs, and friends), the child uses writing as a self-reinforcing act. His writing assumes an audience. His letter is to his grandmother and his thank you note to a friend. Children play waiter, school, and store, and their writing is set in a meaningful context. The question "How do you write my name?" and the commands, "Show me how to Write _____", or "Write _____" imply strategies and assumptions learned in oral dialogue. Parallel to speaking, listening, and reading, early writing is thus a speech act that teaches (Baghban, 1979).

What does the child learn? He so well selects the print features of the linguistic group into which he is born, that his early writing if he speaks English, will resemble English as opposed to Chinese or Arabic (Harste and Carey, 1979). He develops a broad schema for HOW ENGLISH LOOKS WHEN WRITTEN DOWN and works on filling in the details as his experience with seeing print and his practice reproducing print continue. As he moves toward the formation of letters and their arrangements, his logical assumption is that we spell a word the way we say it. Many first and second grade teachers have already learned to rely on auditory rather than visual understanding in order to comprehend their pupils' invented spellings (Gentry, 1981). And when we read children's messages for intent, we reinforce the pleasure inherent in the act of composing. Once again, early conversation

is motivated by need and becomes pleasurable through songs, rhymes, and jokes. Early reading and writing begin as pleasurable activities which have, in a print-laden society, the potential to become necessities.

Humankind operates most often on a practical plane. Language, as a survival mechanism, demonstrates its usefulness early in our lives. In a society such as ours which literally bombards individuals with print, reading and writing are extensions on the linguistic continuum. We begin our lives with the assumption that oral language is meaningful and dialogue is purposeful. Preschoolers who are natural readers, and therefore natural writers, along with those of us who learned to read despite formal instruction, have had no reason to reject this original hypothesis (Durkin, 1966).

Once we determine that language is meaningful, we can discover common characteristics in the processes. Oral language and print are repetitive. Phonemes and graphemes may be used several times in one word, and one word may be used as often as needed. Oral language and print materials addressed to young children are laden with repetitions. Moreover, in life there are basic repetitions, e.g. the wife who finishes her husband's statement because she has heard what he is about to relate so many times before, or children who can guess the ending of a story because they have lived through similar events. A cartoon person from the 1980 season of Sesame Street sang a song based on this very concept.

My name is Fred.
They call me Fred.
When I go out
I put a hat upon my ____.

My name is Fred.
 They call me Fred.
 When I sit down to eat
 I butter up a slice of _____.

My name is Fred.
 They call me Fred.
 Every night when I get tired
 I go to _____.

Children begin to sing the first two lines because they are repeated, and they have little difficulty predicting the missing word, not only because it rhymes with Fred, but also because they have put a hat on their heads, buttered bread, and gone to bed. These predictions based on our life experiences allow us to use few acoustic cues in conversation or visual cues in print in order to discover meaning and respond quickly (Smith, 1971). And the role of experience is so strong that children even change the meaning of a story to conform to what they know when the story presents inconsistencies (Anastasiow, 1973). In Appalachia, primary school children frequently cite the hunting seasons when asked to name the four seasons of the year, although they have been taught summer, fall, winter, spring.

Yet language is also generative. It is astounding that from various combinations of 26 letters, we get all the words in an unabridged dictionary. Experience is not only reinforced in our speaking and reading, thereby quickening both processes, but it also expands our knowledge of the world and with that growth it reorders our perceptions as well as our idioms and vocabulary. The generative or creative aspect of language therefore increases the predictable domain. We continue to learn our entire lives through speaking and listening, and in a print society, through reading and writing. We change, our language changes, and we grow. Living is itself a process. Thus, language, as a mechanism for our survival, maintenance, growth, and pleasure is likewise a process.

Discrepancies between learning to speak and learning to read stem from educational programs. Many educators have failed to view either speaking or reading as a process, and more basically, those who determine curriculum have failed to understand curriculum as a dynamic process, responsive to the changing society and developing individual. The goal in education is to help the child to read, rather than to teach reading to the child (Burke and Goodman, 1975). We talk in order to learn how to talk and we engage in reading thereby learning how to read. There are no substitutes for an encounter with print. Such an approach can only be handled by a philosophy of reading which is meaningful and flexible. In this way can traditional disciplines become part of the lifelong learning of the individual, rather than isolated subject matter. And teachers must view themselves as facilitators of HOW to think rather than judges of WHAT to think.

Times are changing. We are a nation of "how to" books which represent a process approach to coping with life. There are books on how to avoid probate, get a quick divorce, lose weight, psychoanalyze yourself, be a better parent, and teach your children to read. When many of us were growing up, this last category was unthinkable. Parents never knew what was best for their children, at least when it came to reading. Teachers warned that exposing children to print could hurt their vision or cause boredom in school. Parents answered curious children's questions with "You'll learn to read when you go to school". And first graders came home crying the first day of school because no teacher would ever give them a book until the second half of the first year.

Increased pressures to do well and prolong education, the preponderance of American business which advertises in print, television, and the general questioning of the classroom teacher's authority have caused many parents to let their common sense reassert itself concerning their children's preschool years. Parents are reading to their children and answering their questions

about print. As many as 25% of entering first graders can already read, the majority without any kind of formal instruction (Durkin, 1966). Apparently even among our youngest humans, our abilities to categorize, hypothesize, associate, evaluate, predict, solve problems, and integrate do educate us not only how to think and talk but also how to become literate.

The impact of the distinction between competence and performance and the emerging discipline of psycholinguistics have caused us to adjust our focus, as educators, on the learner's competence. Over the last two years, the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English have co-sponsored workshops at their respective national conventions relating the research on child language development to curriculum. A major component of each session was termed "kid-watching". These afternoons were training and sharing sessions based on the assumption that good teachers are also good observers of children. A correlate of such activity is that once teachers understand what children can do and how language functions in their lives, teachers can reinforce for the children how much they know about language. And running through the psycholinguistic literature are themes that language and reading are constructive processes, that they are processes that are only incidentally auditory or visual, and that children need to know that they already know a great deal about how these processes work. Too often we have concentrated on what children do not know, rather than what they do know. Parents rarely doubt that their children will learn to talk and their children sense this confidence.

Another characteristic of our adjusted focus on process, is the research based on miscue analysis in reading (Goodman, 1979). The very term "miscue" as opposed to "mistake" emphasizes degrees of accuracy in usage rather than

black and white judgments about usage. The scoring of oral reading as a linguistic sample is appropriate as an indication of the reader's cognitive processing. We then change our concept of "the good reader" to one who anticipates what the author is going to say and matches his experiences and world view to those of the author in order to obtain meaning from the cues inherent in the print.

Based on a similar point of view, researchers investigate ways we process print. Schema theory assumes that spoken or written text does not in itself carry meaning, but rather provides directions for listeners or readers as to how they should reconstruct the intended meaning (Hacker, 1980). In particular, the refinement of the story schema developed by 2 1/2 years of age, is crucial for this reconstruction not only in conversation, but also in reading. The upsurge of interest in the child's developing sense of story as it relates to reading materials testifies to this realization (Brown, 1977; Applebee, 1978).

The ease with which we tackle reading materials depends on the extent to which the materials match our previous experiences, and our language. The closer the match, the greater our success as readers. Each of us could become a poor reader by encountering a law brief or tax form, or a good reader with a Harlequin Romance. The use of predictable books promotes successful literacy by matching knowledge of the world through oral language to written. Their stories are self-contained units, held together by repetitive, familiar syntactic and semantic patterns. They are not books, as we so often see with natural science texts, which have self-contained pages.

The successful reader then is one who has a model of language in which the oral components support the written, and vice versa, while maintaining

relevance to what he understands about the operation of the world. In other words, an understanding of the description of language experience destines us to find a place for literacy in our lives.

What I can think about, I can talk about,
 What I can say, I can write (or someone
 can write for me),
 What I can write, I can read (and others
 can read too),
 I can read what I have written, and I can
 also read what other people have written
 for me to read (Lee and Allen, 1963).

In the language experience approach, the mismatch between spoken language patterns and written language is eliminated, provided the adult maintains the integrity of the child's language when he records it. As the child becomes his own scribe, he should continue to compose print according to his theory of the world.

Interest in writing as a support process for reading is also on the rise. The acceptance of children's invented spellings in messages read for content, the conference approach which treats a piece of writing as an unfinished product in the act of being developed, the cultivation of audience-awareness in writers with the notion of contract between writer and reader, and strategies such as sentence-combining which demonstrates how language may be manipulated show the effect of psycholinguistic research since the 1960's.

In fact, the "kid-watching", letting learners know that they know, miscue analysis, schema theory, the story concept, predictable books, language experience, and developmental writing are indicators of the return to common sense. Two well-known educational axioms infiltrate the aspects of language learning discussed: "Begin where the student is", and "Teach to his strengths". We all have life experiences. While these experiences

may not match middle class expectations, an understanding gained through observation, reading and writing samples, and the recording of stories show the patterns and strategies with which learners come to school. If we learn based on what we already know, then this point is where to begin each child's educational program, and because experience is the great leveler, we provide numerous and varied experiences through our classrooms on which all children may build.

CONCLUSION

The classroom teacher in particular is caught in the bind between process-competence and product-performance. American life changes quickly and grows more complex. Daily we all face continual knowledge explosions in the society at large. "After 135 years, we still try to use the 'factory' scheme of age-graded classes that Horace Mann popularized, though it never did work well" (Hart 1981, p.444). The system was designed for rote learning and has never changed. Teachers, under pressures from time, scheduling, lesson plans, and principals and parents, race from worksheet to multiple-choice test to remediation. And teachers complain that a principal faced with supporting a teacher or parent now will more often support the parent. Accountability can have no meaning in a context where the participants feel they are sinking in quicksand. Case histories of teacher burnout are accumulating at a frightening rate.

We have fractionalized the field of reading into reading versus reading skills. While both approaches may aim at meaning, "Reading comprehension can be reliably tested as one skill only; the testing of other elements is not only counter productive but generally unreliable" (Pearson, 1980, p.30).

Good readers can score low on standardized tests and poor readers who are test-wise often do very well. How many of us crammed for exams to get our degrees only to forget the information the day after the exam? How many of us require pupils to learn 25 spelling words by Friday? If we continue to give lists of 25 words, our pupils will only know those 25 words, and probably for only 48 hours. With a new perspective, even within the old time frame, we can affect ways of thinking. As one example, if we teach spelling according to word families, we equip students to handle the printed words that come their way for the rest of their lives (Chomsky, 1970). And a process orientation accomplishes one more marvelous achievement. The meaningfulness and joy which motivated their oral language development are maintained in their written language development. Good teachers need to be like good parents. We provide successful experiences that promote problem-solving and growth, but the learner has the ultimate responsibility for the integration of old and new knowledge in order to handle himself in the experiences that come along in his life. Neither teachers nor parents can be with children throughout their lives. Our job is to create independent learners who are able to enjoy the composing that goes with speaking and writing as well as the understanding that goes with listening and reading. For these are the human beings who are going to one day assume our roles as teachers and parents. Let us aim at their humanity and their competence.

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